



The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs

Volume 6

Article 7

10-27-2019

Transformational Leadership: Flow, Resonance, and Social Change

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Recommended Citation

Elhanafi, Enas (2019) "Transformational Leadership: Flow, Resonance, and Social Change," *The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs*: Vol. 6 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/jtb/vol6/iss1/7>

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Leadership is a dynamic relationship between leaders and followers. Successful leadership depends on an individual's ability to influence followers.¹ Factors such as passion, commitment to purpose, and shared common goals and culture play a vital role in leader-follower relationship, which leads to followers developing their own inspiration and motivation.² In other words, effective leaders stimulate people to do more than what they would ordinarily do otherwise.

Aspiring leaders across the globe should study Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela's stories, achievements, struggles, and the characteristics. Both leaders helped not only to shape and unite their countries; they influenced ideas that made the world a better place. Both leaders rose to great heights from ordinary beginnings. Both suffered, but they never let go of their shared vision of a better life for their people and for all people.

How did once-ordinary people like King and Mandela become great leaders? Both men had a unique bond with their followers, and both were charismatic.³ Both had the ability to connect with their followers emotionally, which greatly increased their successes because people act when their emotional needs are touched.

According to Hackman, effective leadership is expected to possess emotional and analytical intelligence, sociability, self-confidence, knowledge of performance strategies, team and trust building methods, and skills to perform activities and duties that foster team effectiveness.⁴ Hackman drew a road map for leaders to guide them to effective and great leadership, when he discussed four qualities of a good leader to include "to know some things, know how to do some things, emotional maturity, and courage."⁵

In leadership theory, the concepts of "flow" and "resonance" signify the ability of individuals to accomplish their intended goals, or dreams, driven by passion and emotional reasoning. Both terms describe the state of individuals when they do their best in a graceful and substantial manner while maintaining coherence and fulfilling commitments.

Best-selling author and former chair of the psychology department at the University of Chicago, Mihály Csikszentmihalyi, who coined the term "flow," studied the phenomenon of enthusiastic energy that occurs when individuals perform at their best in a graceful and fulfilling

¹ Jean Lipman-Blumen, "Toxic Leaders: They're Plentiful," in *Leading Organizations: Perspectives for a New Era*, ed. Gill Robinson Hickman (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2010).

² See, for example, Linda Aldoory and Elizabeth Toth, "Leadership and Gender in Public Relations: Perceived Effectiveness of Transformational and Transactional Leadership Styles" *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 16, no. 2 (2004); James G. Clawson, *Level Three Leadership: Getting Below the Surface* (Boston and London: Prentice Hall, 2012); René van Eeden; Frans Cilliers; Vasi van Deventer, "Leadership Styles and Associated Personality Traits: Support for the Conceptualisation of Transactional and Transformational" *South African Journal of Psychology*, 38 no.2 (2008); James G. Clawson and Doug Newburg, "Resonance, Leadership, and the Purpose of Life," *Darden Business Publishing*. University of Virginia. [Technical note]. Retrieved from https://faculty.darden.virginia.edu/clawsonj/General/SELF_ASSESSMENT_TOOLS/OB-0626_RESONANCE.pdf (accessed October 2, 2019).

³ J. Richard Hackman, "Leading Teams: Imperatives for Leaders," in *Leading Organizations: Perspectives for a New Era*, ed. Gill Robinson Hickman, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2010).

⁴ Ibid, 212.

⁵ Ibid, 221.

way throughout the 1980s and 1990s.⁶ In his book, he indicated that “flow” has several characteristics: time warps (either speeding up or slowing down); one loses self-consciousness, focuses intently on the task, and performs at the peak of one’s abilities. The process seems effortless, as if it were flowing, which makes the experience intensely, internally satisfying, then, one regains a stronger, more capable self.⁷

“Flow” is also associated with the idea of having a purpose in life, or a dream, which involves the following:

1. To identify the area in life that resonates for the self;
2. To invest in the ability to create it and reproduce it;
3. To experience and enjoy the resonance by performing at one’s highest potential; and then
4. To help others find their source of resonance.⁸

Looking to King and Mandela’s leadership, we see that their dreams of peace and their personal sacrifices motivated many to follow their example. By speaking their truths, they convinced others to follow them or to share in the same dream. King’s delivery of the “I Have a Dream” speech and Mandela’s emotional speech to the United Nations on Apartheid reached out to the world. Both inspired crowds by elevating each individual’s self-esteem. The effect was that more people were motivated to get out of their comfort zones and contribute more than they would normally have done.

King’s and Mandela’s leadership successes illustrate the notion that leaders who help individuals improve self-esteem increase their influence as leaders even further, as the ripple effects take place in the larger society. In 1997, Professor of Business Administration, James G. Clawson and a doctor of Sports Psychology, Doug Newburg, at the University of Virginia, wrote a paper on “*Resonance, Leadership, and the Purpose of Life*.” In this paper, Newburg introduced an influential model that he developed on performance in relation to leadership. The model was based on the experiences of World-Class Performers (WCPs) and evidence that he gathered while conducting interviews with WCPs in various professions. His model helps individuals who improve their performance to create a happier and more engaging work environment, an enhanced sense of purpose, and a sense of social responsibility. Ultimately, those individuals grow into centered and powerful leaders. Newburg calls the experience of capturing that harmony or fullness, “resonance.”⁹

A variety of different names are used to describe similar concepts, experiences, or mental states. Csikszentmihályi calls his phenomenon “flow,” while Newburg calls it “resonance.” In using everyday expressions, we can describe this phenomenon as: “to be on the ball,” “in the moment,” “present,” “in the zone,” “wired in,” “in the groove,” or “owning.” This variety of

⁶ Jeanne Nakamura and Mihály Csikszentmihályi, “The Concept of Flow,” in *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (New York City: Springer Netherlands, 2002). Retrieved from <http://nuovoetile.it/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/2002-Flow.pdf> (accessed October 2, 2019).

⁷ Mihály Csikszentmihályi, *The Concept of Flow*, 90, Davidferrers.com, Mihály Csikszentmihályi Articles (2012). Retrieved from <http://davidferrers.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Flow.pdf>.

⁸ Clawson and Newburg, *Resonance*, 18.

⁹ Ibid.

alternative names seems somewhat confusing; however the focus should be on the outcomes, the experience, and the feeling of spontaneous joy, even rapture, while performing a task.¹⁰

It appears that behind every great achievement is a leader who is a dreamer of great dreams that become reality. The heart-mind connection is a significant factor in the leader-follower relationship and subsequent stimulation of followers to action. Heart-felt purpose sparks the passion needed to touch and inspire followers. Consider the role gospel singer Mahalia Jackson had on Martin Luther King during his iconic 1963 speech at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. In that historic moment at the Lincoln Memorial, Jackson said, “Tell them about the dream, Martin! Tell them about the dream!” In response, Dr. King discarded his written script and started speaking from the heart.¹¹

Mahalia Jackson did not make Dr. King an inspirational speaker that day. However, she contributed greatly to the speeding up of the process that helped to make him an extraordinary speaker. On that day, if King had followed his plan and script, he would have given a great speech, but not necessarily one that would have achieved the same outcomes and made that occasion a historic one. On that day, King established himself as a remarkable inspirational speaker and an effective leader. This is a good example of what is often referred to as the preparation stage for an individual to be ready and able to capture the flow and resonance moment.¹²

Effective leadership is essential to successful democratic governance. Although they had similar visions of creating pathways for marginalized people, King and Mandela frequently employed different strategies. King preached passive resistance, and, especially during his presidential years, Nelson Mandela advocated for forgiveness. President Nelson Mandela’s strong commitment to justice and peace provides an authentic and powerful model of the will, power, and spirit of humankind.

Nelson Mandela was a leader in the struggle against the Apartheid system. Throughout the struggle, he was the voice of his people. Mandela established transparent democratic practices in South Africa, and he appointed Fredrick de Klerk, a white man, as vice president to bring unity among all groups in the country. Throughout his life spent fighting for the rights of humanity, Mandela valued relationships and respected all persons as human beings. Unlike some other African leaders, he made it clear that he would only serve one term as president, in order to provide others—particularly young leaders—with opportunities to serve. True to his word, he did not pursue re-election.¹³

It can be said that leaders like King and Mandela rise as the result of their circumstances. Indeed, circumstances can be imperative in creating and developing leaders. Rosa Parks, for example, demonstrated how a private citizen can evolve into a leader, and make an impact on a

¹⁰ Mihály Csikszentmihalyi, *The Concept of Flow*, 90, Davidferrers.com, Mihály Csikszentmihályi Articles (2012). Retrieved from <http://davidferrers.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Flow.pdf> (accessed October 2, 2019).

¹¹ Chris Willman, “How Gospel Great Mahalia Jackson Gave Wing to MLK’s ‘I Have a Dream’ Speech,” *Yahoo Music*, January 15, 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/how-gospel-great-mahalia-jackson-gave-wing-to-108223937471.html> (accessed October 2, 2019).

¹² Clawson and Newburg, *Resonance*, 8.

¹³ “Nelson Mandela,” Biography.com, April 2, 2014, Retrieved from <https://www.biography.com/political-figure/nelson-mandela> (accessed October 2, 2019).

nation. Her seemingly unplanned and impulsive action sparked an important local battle in the larger national Civil Rights Movement and changed the future for African-American communities. In 1955, by refusing to give up her seat to a white man riding a Montgomery, Alabama bus, this long-time member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) inspired and motivated others, including Martin Luther King Jr., to use nonviolence and civil disobedience as a way to protest problems in society.¹⁴

In conclusion, having a dream and a passionate commitment to a purpose can lead to an individual becoming an effective leader. For others, one heroic act can transform them into leaders. An individual's circumstances can cause them to evolve, inspire others, and effect change that seeks to improve the circumstances of others. Thus, one person's change becomes transformational not only for themselves but also for others. The life stories of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela show us that great leaders are made, not born. They continue to influence new generations to become agents of change from their own individual places of influence and to continue developing global perspectives that promise an unlimited scope of change.

About the Author:

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¹⁴ For more information on the life and work of Rosa Parks, see Jeanne Theoharris, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013).